

Traveling Partnerships

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Traveling Partnerships

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

Spend Valentine's Day on a business trip with Satsuki? It's not like Ryuko had anything better to do with her time...

Notes

A late Valentine's Day collaboration with [herokick](#).

KLK FAN PROJECT

TRAVELING PARTNERSHIPS

STORY BY CALICOCAT
ART BY HEROKICK



The two young women had been loitering near the business class check-in desks at Narita for the better part of half an hour. They'd been early for a change, catching a lucky break with the Airport Express from Yokohama, piling on just before it pulled away. A few commuters had been startled when the scruffy, dark-haired girl had seemed to pry the closing doors open with her bare hands, allowing the brown bob of her companion to duck under her arms, suitcases in tow, but most were engrossed in *pazudora* on their cells or texting family or friends. It was just some safety mechanism that had held the doors in place with a mechanical groan, doubtless.

"Nah, nah. G'on ahead, boss." The taller girl flicked red fringe out of her eyes and waved loftily at the salaryman that had been waiting nervously at the entrance to the queuing lane. "Waitin' for the third member of our gang."

She shifted her battered spinner suitcase out of the way and the man bobbed twice in gratitude before hurrying to the grey-suited hostesses at the desks. Her friend kicked her heels leisurely

against the bright yellow plastic of the suitcase she was sitting atop; it was easily as large as she was, and would probably have made a serviceable life-raft should the need have arisen.

“Hey, big guy! You OK in there?” Ryuko Matoi crouched down and thumped the side of the case hard.

“Ryuko-chaaaan! *Sempai* isn’t in there!”

“Could’a fooled me, Mako.”

“Mum said it was important to be prepared!”

“Heh... Sukuyo...” Ryuko shook her head with a grin and straightened up. “Always lookin’ out for ya.” She extracted a small box from the pocket of her Sukajan and pulled off the lid.

“Ya get ya *meishi* printed before we left?”

“Sure thing, Ryuko-chan!” Mako swung the purple rabbit bag down off her shoulders and began rummaging in its soft interior. Ryuko pulled a card from her box, enjoying the crisp whiteness and the precise gloss of the text; for a moment it made her think of black eyebrows and pale skin.

Kiryuin Conglomerate
Ryuko Matoi
Special Assistant to the Director

Beaming, Mako held out her business card.

Kiryuin Conglomerate
Mako Mankanshoku
Special Assistant to the Special Assistant to the Director

The final line was so long that the printers had been forced to split it over two lines. For some reason they’d also seen fit to add a smiling cartoon rabbit face in the lower right corner.

“And the rabbit?”

“To be friendly! First impressions are always important, Ryuko-chan!” Somewhere in the past, a girl introduced herself enthusiastically before rushing towards a tram heading up the steep slopes of an artificial island.

“Yeah... Right enough...” Ryuko smiled, but she felt an unfamiliar shiver of nerves.

Don’t screw up. Don’t screw up. Don’t screw up.

One chance to make the right impression.

Rei Hououmaru never took holiday, and Rei Hououmaru never got ill – at least as far as anyone could remember. There were stories that when seasonal sickness had swept through the Revocs offices sometimes the only people left standing were Rei and Ragyo Kiryuin – and the latter had reasons enough to be untroubled by anything as mundane as an Earthly virus.

So Ryuko had been surprised to see red, bloodshot eyes when she’d visited the conglomerate headquarters the previous week, and the voice was almost indecipherable under snot and mucus as

Rei had pressed the intercom.

“Madam Diregdor... Ryugo Madoi do see you...”

She was human after all. Even for Rei, the uncanny world was evaporating, leaving uniform, simple normality in its wake. With one exception.

Special Assistant to the Director

A special role, in Rei’s place – just for this one trip. This was to be Ryuko’s chance: the chance to show her sister that she could cut it in the world of business. An opportunity to wield a stylus instead of a sword, and for tireless fists to beat keyboards into submission. And striking blue eyes would be constantly vigilant, keeping *undesirables* – the term was loosely defined by Ryuko as anyone dangerous or annoying or possibly just a little too attractive – away from the Director.

“I’ve been waiting for you for some time.” The voice was composed, but there was a little undercurrent of irritation, an echo of their ancient history.

“Yeah, yeah, Kiryuin – me and Mako both.” Ryuko didn’t bother looking back and kicked her spinner gently down the lane towards the check-in desks, then stopped up sharply as a hand grabbed her firmly by the collar of her jacket.

Behind her was a familiar head on a very unfamiliar body: no suit this time, not even the utilitarian blouses that seemed to count as leisurewear, but a practical-looking light jacket: breathable, presumably, the kind of thing one would wear for an afternoon’s rambling in the forests. And that wasn’t the most unusual thing.

“Are you wearing... *sweatpants*?” Ryuko looked at her sister with confusion. “And... *trainers*?” If Satsuki had appeared in a clown outfit, it would have been slightly less surprising.

“Indeed.” Satsuki pulled on the fabric of her trousers, the better to reveal the white laces of a surprisingly fashionable pair of trainers. “For long haul flights, comfort – not style – is the overriding order of the day.” Ryuko could see shining black nylon between the leather of the shoes and the soft cotton of the sweatpants and couldn’t help but give a low, and slightly unwholesome, laugh.

“Hurhurhur. Still wearing stockings tho’, Kiryuin.”

The pout was sharper than lemons.

“They are to prevent me getting DVTs.”

“Don’t you like DVDs, Lady Satsuki?” Mako tilted her head to the side. “I suppose books are more your thing!”

The interjection knocked the conversation entirely off course, like a seasoned batter driving a home run far into the stands. For a moment Ryuko and Satsuki stared at each other as Mako rocked cheerfully on her case-top vantage point.

“And what’s with the neck brace? Ya pull a muscle training or somethin’?” Ryuko failed to contain her curiosity regarding the padded black collar her sister had affected to wear.

“A travel cushion.” Satsuki flexed her neck momentarily, just as she did before their bouts of hand-to-hand combat. “A convenient improvement to the sleeping arrangements when one is travelling in Economy.”

For a moment the departure hall fell strangely silent, and all eyes turned to the trio.

“E... ko... no...mi...” The word seemed entirely foreign to Ryuko.

The instant of unnatural stillness passed, punctured by a desperate question from Mako.

“But what about the flying chefs bringing me food from all around the world?” Ryuko had stoked her anticipation of culinary delights on the journey to the airport; now, in Mako’s mind’s eye, winged chefs flocked ominously into the skies, bearing their delicious creations away and out of her reach.

“But... I thought this was all on the company expense account...” Ryuko found her voice for a moment and then trailed off again.

“It is. But I donated the difference in the cost of our fares to the Kanto region reconstruction efforts.”

“Very... *thoughtful*... of ya to do that on our behalf.”

“Of course, if you feel the orphans are *undeserving* of our small sacrifice, I need only make a phone call and...”

“Orphans...?”

“Indeed. Those who lost their parents in the... difficulties.”

Ryuko slumped in defeat. Wheeling out needy kids was Satsuki’s sure-fire way to get her acquiescence to almost any plan.

“Fine, fine, then.” She pulled a disapproving face. “Ya know, you were a lot more fun back when you were a dictator.”

“And I seem to recall a Ryuko Matoi who would have laughed at such superficial luxuries as business class travel.”

Ryuko muttered something about never having turned down free food and drinks, but eventually relented.

“Ya checked in already then?” Beside Satsuki was a wheeled carry-on bag, little bigger than a large briefcase.

“This is more than sufficient for my needs.”

“Ya kiddin’ right?”

“Not remotely. In fact, I find myself somewhat surprised at the caravan you have to tow for a two-day trip.” She knelt next to Mako’s case and thumped the side, just as Ryuko had done. “Are you in there Mr. Gamagoori?”

“Why does everyone think *sempai* is in here?” Mako jumped down and began to fumble with the fastenings. “It’s just the essentials a girl needs for a...”

“Oi, Mako... I don’t think ya should...”

The catches disengaged and there was an explosion of clothing for every eventuality: suits, dresses for warm and cold weather, casual and sportswear, and topping it all like sugar frosting, a cascade of lacey pink underwear. A gossamer thin pink thong floated down like spring *sakura* blossoms and alighted on Satsuki’s shoulder.

It took them half an hour to repack Mako’s suitcase, and only Ryuko was strong enough to hold the lid shut as the catches were fastened. But fortunately they’d been early for once; they didn’t even have to run from security to reach the departure gate before it closed.

The soundtrack to flight was the low drone of engines and the hum of air conditioning. They at least had bulkhead seats: a row of three on the port side in the little section between Premium Economy and the majority of the passengers in coach, and it was easy enough for Ryuko to pretend that the select little group of sixty were their sole companions for the journey.

Mako had cooed at Fuji-san as the plane began its turn away from the airport; she’d seen it once or twice from the *shinkansen*, travelling between Kanagawa and Kyoto or Osaka, but she’d never seen the perfect truncated cone from the air. Ryuko had pressed her face against the window too; she’d had some chances to see it in the past, but she hadn’t taken much advantage of them. An uncontrolled freefall towards Honnouji had been the only thing on her mind then, that one particular time; almost the only thing – far above her she remembered seeing sparks of burning reds and oranges, like a meteor shower.

“You needn’t have looked so panicked at the security scanners.” Satsuki took a little sip of *sake*. Her plastic cup was far removed from the fine ceramic *ochoko* back in the mansion – more akin to a receptacle for mouthwash from a convenience store – but the *sake* was surprisingly palatable, despite coming from a plastic, screw-top bottle. She wouldn’t throw out the *Junmai Daiginjō* just yet, though.

Ryuko chugged back the last of her Suntory and crumpled the can easily.

“Yeah. Just wondered whether it’d show anythin’, ya know...”

“Out of the ordinary?” Satsuki delicately removed a single white *mochi* from its wrapper, then neatly bit half of it away, revealing fragrant red bean paste. “No, both Shiro and Mr. Mikisugi assure me that even millimeter wave scanners would show a very human young lady.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“Unless, of course,” she gave her sister a strangely focused look, “she happened to have any ultra-hardened life fibers on her person.”

Ryuko laughed awkwardly, and was suddenly curious about how Mako was sleeping to her left.

“Hah. Like I’d have any of those lyin’ around.”

Satsuki ate the remaining half of the *mochi* and then carefully wiped her fingers clean.

“One would have to say that it is perfectly natural, indeed even healthy, for a young woman of a certain age to experiment with her body. But decency requires that there be some limits.”

“No idea what ya mean, Kiryuin.”

Satsuki leaned back against the strange pillow and closed her eyes.

“I wouldn’t even have noticed if you just bothered to dispose of your toenail clippings in the bathroom.”

Busted.

“Was tryin’ to make ya a new Bakuzan,” mumbled Ryuko.

“Out of toenail clippings?”

“Would you care for another drink, Miss Matoi?”

An angel in grey and light blue intervened before Ryuko had to explain herself further, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ain’t gonna say no.”

The seat beside her creaked slightly as her sister settled into it.

“Don’t overdo it.”

A smug grin was the response.

“Heh. Some of us can hold our liquor, Kiryuin.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The cryptic words were drowsy, almost whispered.

One more can of Suntory, then another, and then a miniature of Japanese whisky – just to see what it was like – and then Ryuko relaxed too. The movie on the screen before her had been edited for content, it seemed; someone had edited bursts of blackness into it, each interlude longer than the last as her eyelids closed and then struggled open again.

She woke to dim lights and the gentle sounds of aerial motion. The meaning behind Satsuki’s warning became suddenly all too apparent: she was desperate for the toilet, the seat suddenly too small, everything pressing on all the wrong places. She shifted slightly and found herself strangely pinned in place. To her left, Mako was clutching her arm, head nestling against a bicep and a little patch of drool making a dark, cold patch on the fabric of her sleeve. And to her right, Satsuki’s head had lolled to the side, the strange neck-cushion nestled on Ryuko’s shoulder. Dark hair was piled up against her bare neck, and when she stole a glance to the side, Ryuko was sure she could see her sister’s nostrils dilate slightly as her chest rose and fell. Could she squeeze out of her seat without waking either of her companions? She could not.

She moved cautiously in her seat and pressed her thighs together; she would try to sleep a little longer, despite the discomfort. The constant hiss of the air conditioning was a lullaby, but in her

fragile sleep the noise became the sound of rushing water: rapids rushing over rocks, or a steaming shower in the endless marble of the mansion's bathrooms.

They'd disembarked but all the toilets were in luggage reclaim and the line at immigration wound back and forth on itself into the hazy distance.

Queuing time from this point: 5 minutes, flashed the red LED sign above her.

"That's OK..."

Queuing time from this point: 5 hours.

"What the...?"

Queuing time from this point: 5 years.

"Hey!"

A huge hand like a titan's came down on her shoulder, and she turned to face a customs official.

"You're not permitted to bring toenails into the United States."

"What? I don't under..."

He held up a huge toenail, curved like a wicked sickle and mounted on a sword hilt that had been bound in white silk.

"Do you deny this was in your luggage?"

"I've never seen that..."

"You have the right to remain silent, but anything you say may be used in a TV Movie against you."

Rinko Kikuchi walked past, her fringe dyed bright red.

"Thanks for nothing, Matoi. This didn't even get me a nomination."

Ryuko looked around frantically for assistance.

"Hey, Satsuki. Little help here..."

Mako and Satsuki were standing in bathrobes at the end of the empty channel marked "Big Sisters Priority Lane". They looked back at her sadly.

"I'm sorry, Ryuko; I gave your bail money to the orphans."

"Thank you, Auntie Ryuko!" shouted a hundred grubby urchins by the luggage carousel. They all looked like Mataro. "We'll visit you in prison!" they chanted in unison as Ryuko was picked out in the blinding glare of a spotlight.

The cabin lights came on again and mercifully Satsuki rolled slightly to the other side, her sleep disturbed by the sudden illumination. Ryuko fumbled frantically with her seatbelt and then made a dash down the aisle, past "Engaged" signs and the little crowd loitering near the emergency exits, and then the salaryman she'd seen at Narita who was making the same pilgrimage in business class.

The stewardesses tried in vain to stop her as she barreled all the way through to the luxury of the empty washrooms at the front of First.

“Medical emergency! Medical emergency!” she shouted as she bolted the door behind her.

Minutes later she emerged shamefaced, expecting stern words and the need for at least some apology, but the cabin crew were understanding – apologetic even – as they escorted her back to her seat. There was plentiful bowing and an inaudible conversation between the Purser and Satsuki as Ryuko buckled herself back in.

“What did ya tell 'em?”

Satsuki’s eyes remained closed; there was the most infuriatingly subtle hint of a smile on her lips.

“Nothing you need concern yourself about. Why, Mako... Is that not the coast that we can see now?”

And that was all that Ryuko could get out of her sister for the remainder of the flight.

“Man... I’d heard crime was a problem here, but that’s somethin’ else.” Ryuko pulled casually at the seat of her jeans as she emerged from the restrooms in luggage reclaim.

“How so?” For a moment Satsuki entertained the horrifying idea that some unfortunate had attempted to waylay her sister during her ablutions. She listened for the screams.

“Someone’s stolen half the paneling from the cubicles! Crazy!! They’ve just left a strip like yay big.” She held up finger and thumb, an inch apart. “What’s left would’ve made Junketsu look like a nun’s outfit. I mean, I coulda stuck my head under and had a chat with the girl next door...”

Satsuki’s stare would have frozen the turbulent core of a blue giant.

“I trust you did not...”

Ryuko took the handle of her case and began to saunter towards “Nothing to Declare”.

“Nah, ya know me: *Engrish not so good.*”

Mako began to push the obelisk of her case after her, a scene that put Satsuki in mind of the construction of Stonehenge or the Great Pyramid of Giza; indeed, such efforts seemed quite trivial in comparison. Then she followed with the frictionless grace of her own luggage, offering up a silent prayer to whatever deity watched over her that random profiling wouldn’t cause the customs agents to stop her companions. She doubted she had the patience to endure the multi-dimensional contortions required to re-pack Mako’s case a second time.

There was a smart young man in Arrivals, holding up a sign saying “Kiryuin”. In truth it said something unreadable, but it was close enough and Satsuki was not about to complain that some of the strokes had obviously been made in the wrong direction. They were nearly full-way to the long black limo that their hosts had provided, a Lincoln Town Car Satsuki recognized – though that did beg the question of what, exactly, a Country Car would be – when suddenly Mako jinked to the side.

“Look, Ryuko-chan!!! A Yellow Cab!!!!!!!”

In an instant, Mako was darting round the vehicle, scrutinizing its every surface. A real Checker cab, chrome hubs and fenders, it was a strange, beautiful anachronism. If Travis Bickle had emerged from within, Ryuko would not have been surprised.

“It reminds me of *sempai*’s car! Canwecanwecanwecanwecanwe?????” Mako danced around it, finishing with a flourish alongside the driver’s door. Ryuko grinned for a second, then leapt, sweeping Mako off her feet and out of the path of a passing shuttle bus.

“They drive on the right side here, so the wrong side. Remember?” A burst of laughter and then they both looked back to where Satsuki was standing on the curb-side, the lonely custodian of their luggage. She glanced at the luxury of the black car to her side, leather trim visible in the open door as the driver stood to attention, and then at the faux-leather and fraying stitching of the historical artefact before her. She sighed, slumped a little, and nodded. There was a moment of celebration and then cases were forced haphazardly into the trunk before Ryuko and Mako packed themselves into the rear seats. Satsuki exchanged a few apologetic words in English with the limo driver and then there was a similarly terse conversation with their new host before she slipped into the back alongside a cheerfully bobbing Mako.

This was not her customary business travel with Rei, Satsuki reflected. That was very different: a single, smoothly flowing motion from the conglomerate headquarters to their destination, as elegant and efficient as a t’ai chi form. Instead of that corporate minimalism, on this visit there had already been interminable waiting at the luggage carousel, fumbling at checkpoints to produce documents that had strangely vanished in the space of steps and seconds, and impromptu changes of transportation. It was unpredictable. It was incomprehensible. It was... fun? After all, the world was not all cut from the same cloth. Indeed, the rear seats of the Checker cab seemed largely to be duct tape, and hardly cloth at all. Satsuki shifted slightly, finding a little extra space on the back seat, and a sticky seam snagged her thigh.

The taxi sped across Brooklyn Bridge, the metal latticework throwing out patterns of light and shade.

“A few words on business etiquette here.” There hadn’t seemed to be a better time to address these minor points of order, but Satsuki was pleasantly surprised by the attention she was being given. Attempts to see the Statue of Liberty had met with failure – obscured by the evening haze and the bridge itself – so now Ryuko and Mako had little better to do but listen to her.

“Business cards will likely be exchanged, but with none of the formality you will be accustomed to back in Japan...” She glanced at her pair of assistants: Mako’s focus was part on her, and partly on the cycling set of adverts for restaurants on the little flat screen before her, while Ryuko was twirling her little finger carelessly in one ear. Satsuki shook her head gently for a moment. “... I would imagine.”

She continued.

“However, a steady gaze and a firm handshake will be considered signs of reliability and good character.” She glanced at her sister again. “But not *too* firm, Ryuko. Signing agreements is difficult with broken fingers.”

Ryuko stopped scratching her ear and nodded.

“Uh-huh.”

She shifted from side to side, trying to get a better look at their destination.

“So, uh, what should I call ya in the meetin’?” It had been worrying her for a while.

“‘Lady Satsuki’ or ‘Madame Director’ would be customary.”

Ryuko snorted.

“I ain’t callin’ ya Lady Nothin’ or Madame La-de-da... Folks’ll think I’ve gone soft.”

“...”

She elbowed Mako lightly.

“Hey, Mako... What d’ya think about ‘Don Kiryuin’ instead?” They began to laugh. “*I made her an offer she couldn’t refuse...*” The fake Italian accent was even worse than Ryuko’s attempt at pronouncing English correctly.

“NO.” The temperature in the cab markedly dropped a few degrees. Satsuki rested her arm against the door and looked out of the window. “In any case, the feminine would be ‘Donna Kiryuin’...”

“Pfffft. Like anyone would believe you and feminine anythin’.”

“...”

The metal of the taxi’s chassis was flexing slightly, breathing as though readying itself for an unavoidable explosion, and Ryuko realized she was pushing things a little too far. In front of her, on the ledge she was negotiating, the rock face dropped away, sheer and smooth, for hundreds of yards, the sharp rocks at its base hidden among fog or clouds. So she stepped back from the precipice and continued more cautiously.

“What about ‘Chief’ or ‘Boss’? I could manage that.”

“... Those would be... acceptable.”

Ryuko gave a little nod of acknowledgement.

“Right you are, boss. So, where we headed?” She’d seen a few luxury hotels in the distance as they’d made their way from the airport, and had been bitterly disappointed that the taxi hadn’t departed from its destined course.

“Wall Street.”

Mako watched keenly as the buildings of Manhattan began to block the horizon.

“It’s amazing they managed to clear the forests and build this so quickly!”

Once again, Mako expertly corkscrewed the conversation out of Satsuki’s grasp.

“Forests?”

“Yes, Lady Satuski! The forests. With the wolves.”

Ryuko leant back and mouthed silently to her sister.

“She thought it was a nature documentary.”

“Nature documentary?”

For one, rare moment, Ryuko looked embarrassed.

“*The Wolf of Wall Street.*”

Satsuki raised her eyebrows and managed a wry smile.

“A human nature documentary, certainly.”

The car was moving west on Water Street, the smooth passage they’d enjoyed over the bridge punctuated now by stop signs and heavy traffic. Buildings loomed over them: the sleek and modern, and between them the low, friendly bricks of the city’s older inhabitants. Ahead of the junction with Wall Street itself, the taxi slowed and came to a halt. Satsuki swiped a discreet black credit card decisively through the card reader, and then managed the conventionally impossible task of signing her name accurately with a fingertip on the touch screen.

Ryuko looked around, confused. There were a few shops, offices, opposite them a courier’s van had pulled up beside the pavement and the driver was carrying a document pouch into an expansive foyer. No sign of a hotel, however, unless...

“Is that *it*?” Sandwiched between overbearing brethren were fifteen stories of a little business hotel.

“It has the dual benefits of economy and proximity to our destination tomorrow.”

“Next you’ll be tellin’ me we’re all bunkin’ together.” That came out with more enthusiasm than she’d intended, but even that hope was to be cruelly dashed; they each had a small, but serviceable, room of their own. The expenses would stretch that far, it seemed.

The meeting was not going well.

There was bad blood between the contributing parties, or actual blood; where the historical dealings of the Kiryuin conglomerate were concerned, it was often difficult to tell. Voices had been raised, and though there had been no shouting as yet, Ryuko could see where Satsuki was holding her pen tight, more like a dagger or a slim, black-bladed stiletto.

“Miss Kiryuin,” the elderly gentleman across the table from them had seemed quite affable at first, but was now displaying the tenacity of a bulldog. “Perhaps we should speak in private, away from the encumbrance of our respective colleagues.”

Satsuki placed the cap carefully on her pen, relaxing her grasp for a moment, and then folded her hands on the rich wood surface of the table.

“Mr. Howard,” she looked briefly to her side, “Miss Mankanshoku is undertaking an internship within my office, and Miss Matoi is as valued and trusted a companion as if she were my own

sister. There is nothing you would say to me that cannot be repeated before them.”

“Very well. I will speak plainly then.” The weathered face became hard, like a judgmental patriarch. “Your mother made her position abundantly clear: an unswayable intent to secure a controlling interest in my company. But,” he almost barked, “should you attempt a hostile takeover, I will resist you with every means at my disposal. *Every* means. Do I make myself clear, Miss Kiryuin?”

Satsuki pulled herself up straight in her chair, and Ryuko caught lightning flashing in blue as sunlight caught her eyes.

“In my mother’s... *absence*... I have the latitude to discharge the affairs of the conglomerate as I see fit.” She folded her arms. “There will be no takeover. I seek only an alliance, a partnership if you will, of mutual benefit. A sustained program of investment in your company on our part, in exchange for non-exclusive rights to your technology on preferable terms.”

On the far side of the table there was a moment of surprise and confusion.

“*Non-exclusive?*”

“Certainly. I have no intent to deprive you of the fruits of your labors.” She turned to Ryuko, switching effortlessly and instantly from English to Japanese. “Miss Matoi, if you could pull up the projections for our R&D spend for the coming fiscal year.”

“Sure thing, chief.”

Ryuko mirrored her desktop onto the room’s projector, filling an entire wall with a picture of a custom racing bike; she double-clicked the web browser and then watched in horror as it restored her previous browsing session, tab after guilty tab.

Fortunately, none of their hosts could read Japanese. The images were fairly self-explanatory, though.

The meeting had concluded without resolution, the pages of carefully-worded paperwork that she held in her slim leather folio, still blank in two critical places: by her name, and that of her American counterpart.

Satsuki was sitting in a small Subway, a few blocks from the hotel. It was Saturday, mid-morning, and she was hungry, but she was angry at herself and so had insisted that the staff put nothing but salad leaves in the long wholemeal bun she’d selected, eschewing the enticing cured meats and rich sauces that were on offer. The resulting creation – largely bread and lettuce, and for which she’d insisted on paying full price – was soggy and tasted of penance.

I am a vain and prideful woman.

It had been impossible to get the meeting back on track. By the time Ryuko had managed to close the colorfully errant browser and open a connection to the Kiryuin R&D servers, Mr. Howard’s associates had been looking testily at their watches. The moment of accord had passed.

In my ambition I have wounded the one closest to me.

She'd tried to make light of the events, and Mako had been her usual, ebullient, self after the meeting, but Ryuko had seen through the claims of simple rescheduling and a return trip to resolve matters within a month, or at most two. She'd stormed off to her room and not emerged since. Her messenger status remained resolutely "Offline".

I should not have asked her to meet me where she is weakest. I should have found something – anything – that played to her strengths instead.

Ryuko's school records – all but the most recent ones – were year upon year of failing and near-failing grades. During that time, she must surely have come to loathe questions and presentations and anything of that sort: each one another reason to be singled out and ridiculed by her teachers and peers. And rather than let those experiences sink slowly into the mud of history, Satsuki had dredged them up and put them on public display again.

But I wanted to have her with me. I wanted us to succeed in this together.

There was a blaring of horns and Satsuki looked out onto the street. A car had its window down, and the driver was yelling something unrepeatable. In front of the car she could just make out brown hair bobbing rapidly up and down, and fragments of broken English.

"Thank you!! Thank you!! I love your city!! Come visit Japan please!!"

There was a screeching of tires as the car pulled away, and a few seconds later Mako entered the restaurant, sitting down opposite Satsuki. She was still full of energy, bubbling like a hearty pot of stew, but there were dark rings under her eyes.

"You'll find that sleep comes more easily with practice, on these excursions." Satsuki gave a little shrug. "Exercise in the morning, and *matcha* in the evening are of some help, in my experience."

"Oh no, Lady Satsuki!" Mako responded. "I haven't been sleeping! I was working all night!"

Despite her claimed mastery of the shifting time zones, Satsuki was still tired herself, and for a moment she wondered whether she'd imagined Mako's reply.

"Working?" She smiled kindly. "Do not trouble yourself. This is only a temporary setback." Satsuki nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps the terms will not be so favorable, but we will proceed with humility and where my mother encountered only resistance, we will find success and forge a new alliance."

Her companion bowed a little, as though she were apologizing.

"It was really, really kind of you to let me come with Ryuko, and I'm sorry I haven't been much help. I tried to take some notes, but Ryuko says it doesn't matter because anyway you have an ide... idi... idiotic memory?"

"Eidetic memory."

"Yes, that's what she said! She said you remember everything perfectly, that's why you don't need a diary and why you don't ever take pictures. And I thought that would be great to remember things like that, because I'm always forgetting things. Once I even forgot that I'd eaten dinner and then I ate all Ryuko's *korokke* as well as mine, and she got really angry with me!" Mako paused, and

looked unusually thoughtful. “But then I thought that sometimes there are things it would be good to forget, and it wouldn’t be fun to remember them perfectly forever, like they were movies, or pictures in a book.”

Mostly, memories were bright things for her: a meal shared with new friends on the deck of the Naked Sol, a date with Ryuko that had somehow been extended to include Satsuki – accidentally or intentionally – when they’d found her in town. But sometimes she woke to memories of smothering, the feeling that she’d been wrapped tight in a red blanket, so tight she struggled to breathe. When those memories surfaced in the hours before dawn, she’d slip across to Ryuko’s futon and curl up against her, spooning against her childhood pajamas, pressing herself to someone reliably unreliable. And if Ryuko were absent – if she were racing her bike through deserted streets somewhere – then she’d call Ira and listen to the booming delivery of his simple plans for the day ahead, until the memories frayed and fragmented like gossamer things in the morning light.

But the story of her recent efforts still needed to be told, and Mako raised her arms above her head, crossing them at the wrists in her customary pose for narration. There was murmur of surprise from the other diners – this was a Japanese custom they’d never seen enacted in the films of Kurosawa or Miyazaki – and Satsuki gently, but firmly, reached up and pulled Mako’s hands back down to table level.

“Do go on,” Satsuki encouraged, “but perhaps for my benefit alone, and not for the attention of our erstwhile companions.”

Mako struggled with “erstwhile” for a second, decided it had something to do with eating, and continued.

“I was really worried that Mr. Howard was upset about what happened. I’m used to people being cross with me, and they’re always shouting at Ryuko even if usually they like her in the end. But I thought he might be upset with you, that you weren’t taking him seriously. I didn’t want him to be upset with you, Lady Satsuki, because you’re always trying to do the right thing, even if people don’t always understand it.” She looked resolute. “So I sent him an email to explain things.”

Satsuki was taken aback momentarily. It was unthinkable, to correspond directly with the head of a company with which you were attempting to partner. Such things were only carried out through intermediaries: layer upon layer of lawyers and assistants, like the ringed walls of a citadel.

“You sent Mr. Howard an email? Directly?”

“Yes, Lady Satsuki! I was afraid at first because he seemed really scary, like one of those strict teachers that make you solve problems in front of the class, but then I remembered that even *sempai* used to look scary, and you were especially scary, Lady Satsuki! Once I saw you coming and there was nobody else in the corridor, so I hid in the toilets and then I fell asleep and missed a history lesson! So I thought that maybe Mr. Howard was actually a good person, and that he only seems fierce because he’s trying to protect something he cares very deeply about.” She was briefly bashful, as though she were making a confession. “Just like you.”

She looks like a child admitting she broke a priceless heirloom, thought Satsuki, and gave Mako’s hand a squeeze of approval. It seemed to energize her companion, who resumed her story with a look of determination.

“So I imagined putting on my Fight Club Uniform, because that always makes me feel brave, and I wrote and apologized and said that he wasn’t meant to have seen those photos on Ryuko’s

computer.”

Satsuki managed an expression that was half smile and half sigh.

“That much is certain.”

Mako nodded firmly.

“I said he shouldn’t have seen them because they were Ryuko’s submission to the Kanagawa Bikers’ Charity Calendar.”

Satsuki almost choked on a mouthful of damp bread and rocket.

“You told him Ryuko was... the photographer?”

“I know it isn’t really true,” Mako fidgeted nervously again, “but it’s only a little lie, and I really wanted to help, and I didn’t know what else to say...”

Now it was Satsuki’s turn to look more subdued.

“I would be the last to assert that deception, even of one’s allies, is never justified.”

“And it’s almost true! She has a camera!”

A recent acquisition, Ryuko had a gallingly expensive DSLR whose sole purpose seemed to be securing embarrassing pictures of those she knew: *Satsuki with bed-head. Nonon asleep on a couch, snoring like an ox and drooling. Mako wearing a t-shirt backwards.* Satsuki had come to dread its appearance.

“...sadly, I cannot dispute that.”

Ryuko might have been lacking the technical or artistic skills for the role, but no one could claim she was wanting for the appropriate tools.

“But, Mako... This Charity Calendar... Does such a thing even exist?”

“Ryuko says they keep discussing it, but no one can ever agree! Some of them want girls, and some of them want kittens, and some of them want girls and kittens. But Ryuko says the kittens never sit still on the bikes and some of the girls have allergies!! But I told Mr. Howard that since he’d seen some of the pictures then he should make a donation to charity, and he said that if Ryuko was so keen on motorbikes then she should come and photograph his collection for the calendar because he’s got a vintage Crocker V-Twin that cost more than thirty million Yen. But he said that he’ll keep his suit on, thank-you-very-much, because he isn’t the man he once was and he feels the cold more these days. And after that we were chatting just like we were best friends, so there won’t be any problem with signing the contract now!”

It was fiction piled up on fiction, but rather than being a flimsy, fragile thing that would unravel under the slightest tension, Mako had woven a self-consistent reality so perfect that no one would find a flaw in it. Except, except... There was still the danger of a single, loose thread that could be pulled on. Satsuki made a mental note to task the conglomerate’s media team with commissioning a suitable calendar, just in case one should ever need to be produced. Fifty percent girls, and fifty percent kittens. To account for all tastes.

“And did Mr. Howard leave you with any parting messages, Mako?”

She nodded again.

“He told me that if he was still a young man he’d give me a ride on his motorbike, and I said I was already spoken for, and he said that whoever he was, he was a very lucky man, and I didn’t say anything then because you’re always saying that a lady should have some secrets.”

“And he had a message for you too.” The cheerful face darkened, like the shadow of a passing thundercloud. “He said... He said that he’s sorry that your mother is still missing, but he was glad that it was you that came to the meeting in her place.”

Satsuki closed her eyes and nodded; she had felt that the door was there, instinct had told her as much, but it had taken Mako to find the way to open it.

“And for Ryuko?”

“Just that maybe she’d consider having one laptop for work and one for pleasure!”

Satsuki barely suppressed a smile.

“But I take it you’ve not had the opportunity to pass that advice along to her.”

A somber shake of the head this time, in response.

“I banged on her door, but I think she had her headphones on.” Mako’s lip began to tremble slightly. “I... I know she acts like she doesn’t care about work, or business or anything other than bikes and fighting, but... but... she doesn’t want to disappoint you.”

“Nor I, her.” Satsuki grimaced slightly. “The expectation of our family is a fearsome burden.”

“I even bought her a burger with lots of hot sauce and left it by her door! It wasn’t there when I left, but maybe the hotel threw it out. Or maybe someone else was hungry!”

The bread and wilting greens on Satsuki’s plate seemed suddenly less appealing.

“An ingenious stratagem,” Satsuki affirmed, “and I must commend you for venturing out for food on your own.”

For the interior of Mako’s jacket, a small piece of paper appeared.

“I made a note and showed it to the lady cooking the burgers!”

Hot sauce burger, please give! Hot! Hot! Tasty! Thank you!!

The rabbit had made a further appearance, and there was a little burger alongside to ensure there was no confusion. It was thoroughly charming, but the little note stirred a question that had been lurking at the back of Satsuki’s mind for some time.

“I would not wish to appear ungrateful, or to pry, Mako, but how did you manage to communicate with Mr. Howard? I know his Japanese is little better than basic, and your English – though well-intentioned – is...”

“Umm... I tried to write it myself, and then I used a translation site, but when I translated it back to Japanese it was all gobbledygook, like someone had chopped up a newspaper and rearranged all the characters!” Mako bowed, formally this time, or as much as the table would allow. “So... I called Rei... I mean, Miss Hououmaru. Was that OK, Lady Satsuki?”

Satsuki nodded kindly.

“That was a good choice.”

“I was a bit afraid of her too, at first, because she’s always so serious! But I think she was worried about how things were going – even though you said she should only be worrying about getting better! – and when I explained she said she would translate things for me.”

Satsuki was still smiling, but it was somewhat more brittle now.

“You explained... everything?”

“She said that she wants to have a word with Ryuko when we all get back, but you’ll make sure she’s okay, won’t you?”

“She” was left tantalizingly ambiguous.

“I will intercede. I would not have any injuries, not even just a bruised ego, befall either of them. Particularly should the... *discussion*... become more heated.”

That was something that seemed to have been preying on Mako’s mind; she breathed out slowly, as though a weight had been lifted. In an instant she was jiggling cheerfully in her seat, her usual self again.

The tables nearby were filling up now: couples and colleagues joking and chatting beside them. Midday, or thereabouts, stark winter sun slanting down between the tower blocks. Mr. Howard would already be on his way to the airport, ahead of a series of meetings in Germany that were scheduled for the coming week. Bearing in mind her own commitments, it would be at least two weeks before Satsuki could arrange another visit to sign the completed contract. No matter: patience was still one of her particular virtues, and for one who had measured her plans in decades, two weeks was little more than a minor inconvenience. Two weeks, rather than at least two months of tortuous renegotiations – doubtless Mako had little idea of the savings of money and effort she had facilitated.

“I am in your debt, Mako. It will be a matter of some little time, but when I return to sign the contract, would you consider travelling with me again? You seem to bring good fortune in these endeavours.”

“But we can finish everything now, Lady Satsuki!”

A cheerfully battered laptop was produced from the depths of Mako’s purple rucksack. She typed quickly, albeit with two fingers, tongue peeking impishly from the corner of her mouth in concentration. When the screen was turned towards Satsuki, it showed the electronic version of the contract that slept, incomplete, in her folio.

Mako took Satsuki’s hand, and drew her index finger carefully across the laptop’s sensor.

AUTHENTICATED - SATSUKI KIRYUIN, DIRECTOR.

A complex mosaic in black and white appeared beside her name, a digital signature that could attest the document's authenticity. By her counterpart, a complementary pattern was already present.

"That's the contract signed then!" Mako beamed and closed her laptop. "Rei said that you didn't even need to come here; you could have done it all with video calls and the interwebs! But I know you always like to meet the people you're doing business with in person, so you can look them properly in the eye and make sure they're trustworthy." She brought a finger up to her lips in contemplation. "Dad says it's better not to meet your partners, at least not after you've done business with them once, but they always want to see him again, so I guess they think like you do!!"

The miserable sandwich was half-eaten, but Mako had, through imagination and enthusiasm, recovered half the situation. Satsuki pushed the plate away from her; though there was still one further thing to put right, something needed to be discussed with her companion beforehand.

"I have a confession to make, Mako. The nuance was perhaps lost on you, but during the meeting I let slip that you were an intern in the conglomerate. It was a little deception to strengthen my position – I hope you do not object."

Far from being upset, Mako appeared delighted with her sudden employment.

"That explains why Mr. Howard asked what it was like working for you! And I said it was fine apart from when we had to fire the cannons at Ryuko, and he asked if that happened often, and I said it was only once when she got really crazy, and he said that Japanese companies must really take discipline seriously!!"

It was a well-understood precept of warfare: keeping your opponent off-balance. On that basis, Mako was a master tactician.

"Nonetheless," Satsuki tried to guide the conversation back onto its earlier direction, "it is something I would like you to consider. An internship. If Ryuko and Mr. Gamagoori can spare you, that is." Satsuki pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Rei is overworked, I suspect, which has contributed to her recent poor health. And the two of us sometimes have a tendency to dwell too much on the past. It would be good to have someone more forward-looking in the office some of the time."

"Mum and Dad would be so proud of me!" Mako paused, but while her smile remained, there was acceptance and some sadness in her eyes. "It's so kind of you to say, Lady Satsuki, but even I know that the conglomerate only takes interns from the best universities. And I've hardly a single award for anything. Once I even got zero on a paper where they gave you a point for writing your name!"

Honest to a fault. Satsuki leant across the table and spoke quietly, sharing her thoughts of conspiracy.

"Would you think less of me if I abused my position as Director – just this once – and relaxed our somewhat restrictive hiring requirements? After all, you have already experienced so much more than most I am called on to interview. And no matter what I have asked of you, you have never disappointed me; I can think of no higher recommendation. I am certain we can say that you have graduated from the University of Life, *summa cum laude*."

"Graduated? Me? Will I get a certificate?!"

“I will have one drawn up on our return.”

“Then it can go on the wall with Dad’s certificates. He gets them all from the internet! One of them is for animal medicine, but he says that people are animals too so that’s okay!”

Satsuki took Mako’s hand gently, drew the slim, black fountain pen from inside her jacket, and wrote carefully across her palm.

INTERNSHIP

“In case you forget.”

Then she rolled the fingers closed and gave Mako’s hand a tender squeeze.

“And now, let us go and shake my sister back to her senses.”

“You’re not thinking of cutting her open and pushing me inside again, are you?!”

Satsuki gave a surprisingly wicked smile that was significantly more Student Council President than it was caring *onee-sama*.

“Well – I had been hoping to avoid that...”

“Only I’ve put on weight recently!” Mako slapped her tummy cheerfully, “And I don’t think I could fit inside anymore!”

“I ain’t never comin’ back to America.” Ryuko had continued to sulk into the early afternoon, but even she needed to eat, and “Room Service” had turned out to be two very familiar faces and an elegant black shoe wedged firmly in the door so that it couldn’t be closed. Entreaties from Mako and some implied threats from her sister had maneuvered her as far as Stile’s Farmers Market, where at least there were fresh lemons in abundance.

“Nonsense. Your enthusiasm for motorcycles has proved to be something of a hidden asset.” Satsuki picked up a large peach and appraised it carefully; the aromas in the space of the market were utterly enticing. “You were perhaps unaware, but Mr. Howard has quite the collection of classics. I’m sure he found your little gallery utterly fascinating.”

“It wasn’t the bikes I was worried about.” Ryuko dropped a lemon into her basket. “It was what was on ’em.”

“There was something on the motorcycles? I hadn’t noticed.”

Surely she must’ve seen...

Long black hair that flowed over the fairings of the Kawasaki, the girl wearing a haughty expression and little else. Ryuko had stabbed frantically at Alt-F4 and her reward had only been an endless procession of popups asking if she wanted to extend her subscription for a further three months at a reduced price.

“Ryuko-chaaaaaan!! Are you ready yet!?” The slideshow of mortifying memories was interrupted by the appearance of a large stack of overflowing baskets, which served to almost entirely hide the third member of their party.

“Some for Mum and Dad, some for Mataro – though he doesn’t deserve any – just carrots for Guts, and plenty for *sempai*! After all, he needs to keep his strength up! Don’t you think he was looking a little worn-out recently, Ryuko-chan?” She paused, and scratched her head thoughtfully. “Perhaps he’s pushing himself too hard! Anyway, all the rest for me!!” She twirled happily, holding the stack of produce like a dancing partner.

“Hey, Mako, I don’t think yer allowed to bring all that fruit back into Japan.”

The waltz stopped and Mako tilted her head to one side.

“No? Why not, Ryuko-chan?!”

Satsuki appeared from nearby, her own basket holding little other than the single peach.

“Ryuko is correct. There are quite onerous restrictions on bringing fresh produce into Japan.”

“Oh well! I suppose I’ll just have to eat it all today then!!”

In the whiteness of the late afternoon sun, the shadows of trees and tower blocks were long fingers reaching across the green of Central Park. They had a broad flat rock to sit and picnic on, and between them they were making good inroads into the bags of Mako’s plunder. There had been no further mention of motorbikes, or shapely embellishments thereon, and buoyed by the feast they’d procured, Ryuko was a little more her normal self.

“Uh, before we leave,” she wiped lemon juice off her lips with the back of one hand, “I think we oughta discuss the bonus situation.”

“Bonus?” Satsuki leant back, propping herself on outstretched arms and feeling the texture of the rock beneath her fingertips.

“Yeah, bonus. What with this trip bein’ such a success and all.”

Satsuki rocked her head from side to side, as though performing a rough mental calculation.

“I think fifty percent would be quite normal, in the circumstances.”

“Yeah, yeah. Fifty percent. Sounds good.” Ryuko paused. “Fifty percent of what, exactly?”

“Of the salary you draw from the conglomerate. Payable in a lump sum with your next paycheque.”

“Right.” Ryuko was satisfied for a second, and then remembered the ‘honorary’ status of her current position. “Heyyyyyy... I don’t like the sound of...”

“Mako, as an intern, receives a generous monthly wage, of course.”

“Mako? Intern?”

“Perhaps Ryuko-chan can expense her lemon?” Mako asked, innocently.

“Indeed; that would surely be permissible. And I imagine that her ‘subscriptions’ are tax-deductible too. ‘Unavoidable business expenses incurred during the execution of her employment’.”

Ryuko put her head in her hands.

“Okay. Time out, time out. When the two of ya gang up on me, I don’t stand a chance.”

The rumble of the nearby traffic was punctuated by a chorus of “Hallelujah!” from Mako’s phone, and she began to rummage in her rucksack.

“I didn’t want to forget, so I set an alarm!”

They were a little the worse for wear, but two objects were eventually produced from the mysterious depths. Mako held one out to each of her companions.

“It’s Sunday morning back home! Happy Valentine’s Day, Ryuko-chan! Happy Valentine’s Day, Lady Satsuki!”

Ryuko grasped desperately at the chocolate and the chance to escape the previous topic of conversation.

“That’s more like it... a Hershey’s Bar. Way to a girl’s heart, ’n’ all that. Thanks!” She began to tear into the wrapper with characteristic abandon.

“It’s not much, but I wanted to get you something from here!!”

Satsuki nodded in approval, and started to carefully unwrap her own. Beside her, Ryuko bit off half the bar in one go. She chewed enthusiastically for a second, slowed, and then stopped, uncertain.

“Umm... That’s not exactly the flavor I was expectin’” She began to turn the wrapper over and over, looking for anything that resembled an expiry or “Best Before” date.

“Maybe it’s just...” began Ryuko.

“An acquired taste,” interjected Satsuki. She chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then swallowed. “But then again, the same could be said of all of us.”



The seats in First Class were enveloped in light wood, giving each of them a space like a compact open-topped cabin. Mako had taken a berth by the window, so Ryuko and Satsuki had adjacent seats in the central block; seats alongside one another with a square hatch between them that could be used to pass food or messages, or just to hold a conversation.

“Ain’t the orphans gonna riot?” The dinner service had finished a while ago, and the fine china – easily the equal, or near equal, of anything in the Kiryuin mansion – had been cleared away; Ryuko sat on the edge of her seat, watching her sister through the hatch as she worked on her laptop.

“The orphans will be unperturbed.” Satsuki typed briefly; Ryuko saw fingers move instinctively to Ctrl-S, and then she closed the carbon fiber of the lid. “These luxuries will be at the expense of our family account, and not anyone else.”

Ryuko crossed her arms and rested her elbows on the frame of the hatch.

“Ya could’a done that on the way out too.”

“But then you would not have appreciated the improvement.”

Mentally, Ryuko tried an exploratory thrust, probing defenses.

“Just a coincidence it’s Valentine’s Day then.”

Satsuki didn’t rise to the bait. Ryuko rested her head on one forearm, letting the world rotate through ninety degrees.

“Ya know – ya didn’t hafta split your savings with me.” She watched her sister carefully, trying to gauge what her reaction would be. “I’d have got by.”

“Yes. Yes, I did.” Satsuki squeezed the bridge of her nose gently, one of the rare indicators that it had been a long day. “Half of it was yours; half of it was always yours.”

She had a little piggybank somewhere in the cupboards back home. She’d been given it when she was very young: her mother thinking it might teach her some measure of fiscal responsibility, while her father had just assumed that she would like its cheerful face and the cool smoothness of the pottery. She would fill it with 100 Yen coins, and when it was full she would carefully open the plug in its belly and count the coins out: half for her, and half for her absent sister. From that little half-pile of coins she bought herself a birthday present each year; the things she imagined a younger sister would have bought her: things that were precious for their simplicity. Fine stationery, mulberry paper on which to practice her calligraphy, the sable brush she still used: soft bristles that she sometimes drew across her fingertips as though they were affection.

She always let two coins remain, though, because she’d read the legends of the Greeks and she wished the ferryman to give her sister smooth passage.

But now, with the benefit of hindsight, she realized that she’d misjudged the tone of her sister’s gifts. As she had grown older, she’d imagined she might have been given high literature and opera – Joyce and rare recordings of Callas – but there was a mischievous part of her that delighted in the reality that was rarer-still *doujinshi* and MP3s of thrashing guitars. She’d imagined a little sister that was a reflection of herself – her own desires and interests displaced by a year or so – but the things that Ryuko thought to give her were infinitely more valuable in their carelessness. Scattered gifts like wind-blown flowers from a service station that had endured a hurricane as she’d forced her bike at more-than-human speed along the curves between Kanagawa and Tokyo. Something carelessly given to brighten old wood and ancient days in the mansion. Things that meant it was only right that half of all she had be for Ryuko, in turn.

Ryuko looked across to where Mako was lying: her seat fully reclined. There were gentle words of hushed conversation, and the flickering of movement and what might have been blonde hair on the screen.

“Satellite video link back ta Japan. Gonna be expensive.”

“She sacrificed her Valentine’s Day to be here with us. Let them talk.”

“If ya wanna call, y’know...” Ryuko made a little nudge of the head that somehow managed to convey *short, musical, annoying*, “... then go ahead.”

“That will not be necessary.”

That was an unexpected bonus, and Ryuko started slightly, but her sister continued:

“She called me this morning. *Very* early this morning.”

Ryuko deflated a little.

“Got the time zones wrong, huh?”

Satsuki gave her a sly look.

“She wouldn’t be the first person to make that particular mistake.”

Ryuko laughed off the barb and stretched.

“Gonna see if they’ve got any lemons in the kitchen bit. Ya want anythin’?”

“The word is *galley*. But no, thank you.”

There was a neat display of ice cream tubs and chocolates, and a hand-written sign encouraging passengers to help themselves to whatever they liked. Ryuko rummaged briefly in the cupboards, but there was no sign of fruit of any kind.

“Is that really Lady Satsuki Kiryuin?” One of the stewardesses had appeared silently beside her.

“Huh. Yeah, sure is.”

The young woman glanced down the aisle, but Satsuki was hidden inside her little cabin.

“She’s so striking...”

Ryuko was about to make a smartarse comment about how her sister sometimes looked, first thing in the morning, but thought better of it.

“Course, she wouldn’t know what day of the week it was, without me to help her.”

“Really?” The stewardess seemed quite impressed with the claim. “Do you work closely with her?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryuko tried to adopt an unfamiliar posture of business-like swagger. “We were in rival companies a way back. But there was a merger, ya know. Business stuff. Now I make sure she doesn’t get into any trouble.”

“Do you think you could ask her for...”

“An autograph?” That wasn’t an entirely uncommon request.

“A little note for Valentine’s Day.” The young woman blushed. “Everyone would be so jealous.”

That was a gutsy request for a girl who’d seemed a little inexperienced, even unsure of herself, as she’d shown the three of them to their seats, and Ryuko felt a brief swell of camaraderie. She winked.

“No problem, Miss...?”

“Takako.” The stewardess bowed deeply.

“Express delivery, comin’ up. But don’t get into any fights over it – got my hands full takin’ care of...” she glanced back over her shoulder, “... that one.” A slim arm and slender fingers appeared over the boundaries of the seat – an accidental acknowledgement – as Satsuki stretched for a moment.

Ryuko poured out cupped handfuls of sweets into her sister’s lap when she returned to her seat.

“Got ya some chocolates.”

One of the little parcels was examined for a moment. White chocolate: Swiss, expensive, but still less precious than...

“Thank you.”

“Ahahah... Y’know, the crew are a bit star-struck... Lady Satsuki Kiryuin flyin’ with them, and all that.”

“Are they, now?”

“I think they’d like it, if ya could write a little Valentine’s message for ’em.”

Satsuki opened her mouth as if to say something, and for a fraction of second Ryuko was sure that the lights in the cabin dimmed slightly. She felt the hairs on her forearms rise gently as the air between the two of them became charged. Then the storm clouds dissipated and the sunshine of the infuriatingly subtle smile pierced through.

“Of course. How many...?”

“Ehh... Just a couple. Yeah. I’ll need to check the names later: so don’t worry ’bout that.”

Ryuko handed over a couple of pieces of folded paper and watched attentively as Satsuki began to write neatly on them. Occasionally she would pause between characters, eyebrows furrowed, as though she were trying to remember something, or catch at an ephemeral thought.

“Wow. A haiku. Nice. You bin watchin’ period dramas ’bout all those swoonin’ ladies in the Imperial court? The great Lady Satsuki Kiryuin bein’ a closet romantic... Who’d have thought it?”

Satsuki held the notes aloft between both hands, as though she were about to tear them in half.

“Do you want me to be complicit in whatever little scheme you have in mind, or not?”

There was a fragment of silence cast up within the murmur of engines and equipment.

“Wha’...?”

“And I don’t expect to find these on eBay, alongside broken crockery from the mansion ‘as used by the great Lady Satsuki Kiryuin’.” There was a slight, and not entirely approving, narrowing of the eyes. “*Cometgirl420*.”

Ryuko glanced away and laughed awkwardly.

“Altitude’s gone to yer head, Kiryuin. Yer talkin’ nonsense.”

Satsuki placed the papers back on the little table, and began to write smoothly again.

“What’s that catchphrase of hers? ‘*Blaze it*’?” The last line of the haiku was completed, and then signed in careful, precise characters, neater than the black print on Ryuko’s business cards.

“Appropriate for someone with a fiery temperament, wouldn’t you say? Though perhaps with some unforeseen botanical connotations...”

Ryuko felt equally fiery red surge to her cheeks; then the airframe shuddered for a moment as they passed through some turbulence, and she almost tripped over her own feet in shock. Satsuki was absentmindedly beginning to unfold the notes as though preparing to check the visual balance of the completed compositions.

Ryuko dropped to one knee and placed a hand gently over her sister’s.

“Ninety-nine point five percent positive feedback, though. ‘*Would buy again*’.”

Satsuki started back in surprise momentarily, and then mercifully began to refold the paper under the tent of Ryuko’s fingers.

“Really? Perhaps I should be offering *her* employment, then.”

“Ahahahaha.” It was difficult to match Satsuki’s gaze, and Ryuko managed to find something intriguing at the front of the aircraft and the vanishing-point convergence of the contours around them.

“There would need to be some discussion of the missing half percent, however.”

Ryuko’s attention remained fixed on the door to the cockpit, and she only relaxed when she felt paper gently pressed into her palm. The lights in the cabin began to dim, at the windows first, then moving inwards until there was just a slim line of illumination above the center of the fuselage. Then that faded to nothing too, leaving only the faint blue-white of the desk lamps. She watched blue eyes sparkle for a moment beside her, blue light upon blue, as she rose: the notes held carefully closed in one hand.

“Hey, Satsuki. You’ve made someone’s day, ya know?” In the little space of the galley, Ryuko could see the stewardess stowing containers and drinks trolleys. “Thanks... I know these ain’t yer kinda thing.”

“Valentines? Perhaps not.” Satsuki closed her eyes and stretched again, languid and feline.

“Though I’ve always done my best to express gratitude and appreciation, in my own – admittedly singular – way.” She opened her eyes and pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Still – perhaps this is a skill that should be polished. After all, who knows when one will wish to surrender to the truth of one’s own feelings?”

It was impossible to tell whether her sister was being serious, her expression impenetrable in the dusk of the cabin, and Ryuko gave her a sidelong glance.

“Hah! Pity the dope that gets a real valentine from Satsuki Kiryuin. That’d be some weight of obligation, right there. Like carryin’ around a battleship.”

A pause again, long enough for a single, silent breath.

“I doubt that such a bounty would ever be bestowed on one unworthy of it. Or one who was unable to bear its burden.”

There was a moment to say something, but it passed like the wind catching a spiraling spring petal, and then Satsuki was busy arranging her documents and bedding for the short artificial night of the flight’s remainder.

Ryuko slipped back to her seat, unfolding the soft quilt and pillow, and moments later heard the gentle whirr of Satsuki’s seat reclining as her sister prepared to sleep. She held the button until her own seat had become a serviceable bed too, and then rolled to face the partition that separated the two of them.

“Put yer hand on the panel.”

“Why? Where?”

“You’ll know.”

Ryuko closed her eyes and concentrated. In the scintillating darkness of screwed-up eyelids she could see shimmering white: the rough shape of someone reclining, one arm raised up and fingertips touched to the panel and matching the position of her own.

There.

It was *Shingantsu* – “Authority of the Mind’s Eye” – or as close a recreation as she could manage for the moment. Uzu had tried to explain the technique to her, but that was as easy as trying to explain to someone how to use an arm, or how to breathe. It was something that he’d simply been able to do, some aspect of his personality or physicality that had been made manifest by the life fibers. She had to work at it though, just as she’d sometimes struggled with her studies, but her efforts – and the piercing, iron-bar-through-the-skull headaches they sometimes caused – were worthwhile when she could see, and even feel, the presence of the figure lying next to her.

“We’re flyin’ west, ain’t we?”

“Yes.” Ryuko wasn’t sure whether sure she was hearing the words, or somehow feeling them: just as she’d once heard her name called frantically as she plummeted through clouds, slipstreaming syllables.

“Like we’re goin’ back thru time. If we keep on goin’, it’ll be Valentine’s Day forever.”

She was sure she felt the smile.

“Almost.”

The words got ahead of her and tumbled out into the space between them, audible, inaudible or something in-between.

“Happy Valentine’s, Kiryuin.”

There was a quiet breath that even years later Ryuko would be unable to parse into a chuckle or a sigh – perhaps something surprising, warm and wistful.

“We’ve already passed the International Dateline; it’s Monday now.”

Ryuko kept her fingertips in place, but opened her eyes and looked at the little notes Satsuki had given her.

*Think not less of me,
Though I be born of duty:
Happy Valentine*

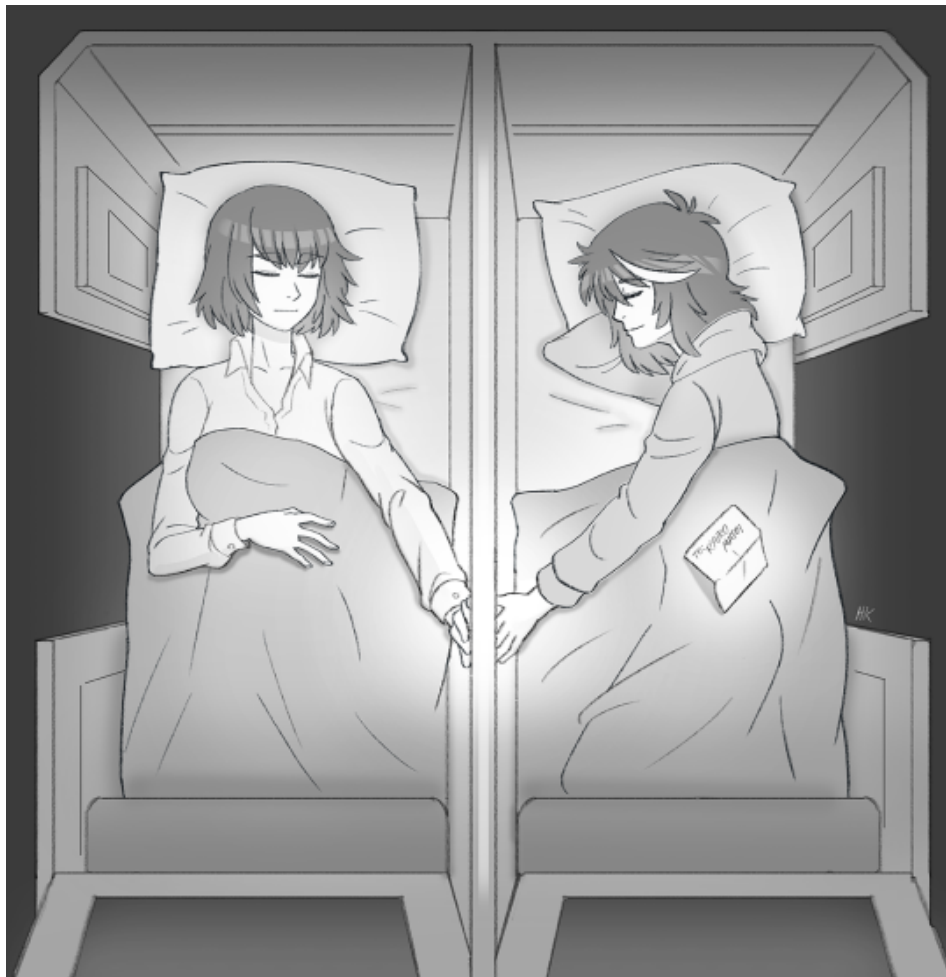
- Satsuki Kiryuin

It was an anonymous Valentine, though perhaps not the kind people normally encountered. With her free hand Ryuko carefully unfolded the second of the two pieces of paper, revealing the hidden text in her scratchy handwriting on the reverse side.

To Ryuko Matoi

Then she slipped it neatly under her pillow, closed her eyes and watched the silhouette of the figure of light dozing beside her. Where their fingertips overlapped their coronas merged together through the panel, making a single incandescent being.

“But I’m always behind you, Sis... My watch is slow.”



*I can give myself to her
In her dreams
Whispering her own poems
In her ear as she sleeps beside me.*

- Yosano Akiko

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